DON WALSER
PAIGE
PAIGE

"It’s like eight digits, a dash, two digits, another dash, and then five more digits. It's so weird."

Shane was going on about the tattoo - a sequence of numbers needled onto the hip of a girl he knew at work. According to him, she couldn't remember exactly when or where she got it; or what it meant. She figured it had happened during one of her frequent over-indulgent party nights - she's a "never the same bed twice" type of gal - and trying to decode it had become her sober-time obsession. To that end, she'd shown it to Shane and a couple other people around the office, asking for opinions and advice.

So far, nobody had managed to think of anything helpful, though many had asked to see the ink again. The girl was, apparently, a fox.

"That's a lot of numbers," I said. "Does it wrap around her entire pelvis?"

"No," Shane answered. "They're pretty small, like maybe a quarter inch. Also, they're stacked; like three or four lines."

I turned my Oldsmobile into the parking lot of Oak Park Mall and headed for the back where the employees' entrance was. "Did you write them down?" I asked, mostly to pass time.

"No." Shane stared at a couple of girls leaving the mall. "I suppose I could ask to see them again."

"Good idea." I parked next to Brian's car, killed the engine and checked the time. Brian clocked out at nine, so we only had a short wait.

"What I was thinking," Shane said, still watching the girls as they drove away, "is that there can't be too many tattoo parlors around here, so if we went to each one and asked around, maybe we could find something out."

"You could do that, sure," I said. I reached across Shane's leg, popped the glovebox and got a pack of cigarettes.

"Maybe you could come with?"

I lit up, took a drag, then blew smoke out the window; deliberately avoiding the question. Shane didn't want to go by himself because he was too timid to do things like that alone. I don't want to give the impression that he was a puss - far from it. It would take all my fingers and toes to count the number of times he'd backed me in whatever stupid mix I'd stir up; but I've never once had to catch his back for mouthing off to the wrong people at the wrong time. He just wasn't the type to start stuff and was too easy-going to look for trouble even when it was dancing at the tip of his nose.

Shane hitting the tattoo shops asking questions by himself? He wouldn't get far.

But I didn't want to burn a lot of my time wearing out shoe leather for some office slut I'd never even get a shot at. So, I let the question float and sink with no reply.

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Brian exited the employee's' door, looked around, spotted my car and smiled. He trotted over, pulling off his necktie and bullshit employees' vest complete with the "Hi, my name is ___" pin.

Shane vacated the front seat and hopped in the back while Brian claimed shotgun.

"Christ, get me out of here," he said, tossing the tie and vest to the floor where they served as a mud-matt for his tasseled, size ten loafers. "Before I kill somebody."

Happy to oblige; I fired the ignition, put her in gear, and away we go.

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"Had to work the register all fucking day because that fucking punk didn't bother to show up. Call? Fuck, no. Didn't bother to call, either. I left a stack - this big - stack of paperwork for Jeff to handle tomorrow. He'll be pissed but fuck him."

Brian was bitching about his work as an assistant manager of a mall anchor department store as we made our way down W95th.

"Hey, Brian?" I interrupted. "Please tell me about your day, honey. We never talk anymore." I blew him some wet kisses.

He laughed. "You can get fucked, too," he said.

"That's the plan," I said

"Speaking of which," Brian said. "What exactly is the plan?"

"Keeping it classy tonight. Westport. Bars. Live music. Tail. But first...," I turned right into the parking lot of the Metcalf South mall.

"Yeah?" Brian asked. I shrugged for a reply. "Okay, but if he tries to pass that powdered shit off on you again...."

I cruised around to the dumpsters and parked next to the chain link fence. Shane opened his door, but I told him, "Stay here. Garth gets jumpy too with too many people."

"None of that powdered shit," Brian said as I quit the car.

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"Obviously it's a lottery number. A winning lottery number."

Shane had clued Brian into the mystery of the tattoo, and he was offering a solution as I slid behind the wheel.

"No," Shane said. "That's way too many numbers for a lottery."

"Sure, now," Brian continued. "But not in the future. Since it is a winning number, it must be from the future when they have fifteen-digit winners."

While Shane considered that, I pulled a baggie from my jeans and tossed it to Brian.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Pills," I said.

"Okay?"

"That's all I know. Pills."

Brian laughed and tossed the bag back. "You first."

I took two in my palm; they were small, the size of aspirin, but pink. *None but the brave*, I thought, threw back my head and popped them in my mouth, swallowing dry.

I smacked my lips then handed the bag to Shane. "How many?" he asked.

"I don't know." I caught his eyes in the rear view. "I took two."

Shane shook out two for himself then handed the bag to Brian.

"Marvelous," Brian said. "Mystery pills. Probably make us all grow tits."

"Yeah? Think of the money we'll save not having to buy girls drinks anymore!"

Brian took his share and dry-swallowed. "Gah," he said, putting the baggy in the glovebox and helping himself to the cigarettes. "How much did you pay for them?"

"Nothing," I answered. "Consider them Garth's apology for the powdered shit."

Brian rubbed his eyes and chuckled. "Tits," he said. "If we're lucky."

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"I can't go to the 'port like this," Brian said, tugging the collar of his button-down work shirt. "Swing by my apartment."

"Fuck no," I answered. Then I said to Shane, "Hey, go into my gym bag and get Brian a shirt, will you?"

"I'm not wearing your nasty old shirts. Come on, I'm only ten minutes away."

"You were ten minutes ten minute ago. Too late now. Besides, those are clean shirts and more stylish than anything you own anyway."

"Here," Shane passed forward a decent blue, checkerboard print with three buttons down the chest and a collar. Brian held it up, turned it around looking for stains, and grunted. He sniffed the pits.

"Just put it on, pussy. We're not going back."

Brian sighed and started unbuttoning his work shirt.

"Anyway, Tammy's at your apartment, right? She'd find some reason to keep you there."

Brian slipped out of his shirt and tugged mine on, adjusting the collar.

"I'm surprised she even let you out tonight," I continued. "Seeing as how it's a Saturday and all."

Brian pulled the sleeves down his biceps and held out his arms to check the fit. It was a little loose.

"Did she give you a curfew?"

"Tammy doesn't live with me anymore," Brian answered.

"Well," I said, turning off Nall Street. "That explains it."

"Hey," Shane leaned between the seats and asked, "When do the pills kick in do you think?"

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"Fifteen digits total, right? A woman's measurements have three digits *'36, 24, 36'*. Three times five is fifteen. Clearly the tattoo memorializes a lesbian orgy she had with four other women."

Yet another one of Brian's explanations given as we walked the streets of Westport; and this one made Shane stop dead in his tracks.

"Wait," Shane said. "Wait.... Really? No, what about the dashes?"

"The dashes represent the sexual positions each of the girls took. Think about it."

And with that I figured it was time to start drinking so I pulled open the very next door we came upon. Loud, live rock and roll music blasted forth. "Gentlemen," I ushered my friends into the bar.

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It was too loud to think, much less talk, but Brian managed to get us crammed into a booth with four skinny Vietnamese girls. Of course, we bought them drinks. Then Brian got one dancing - the best-looking one with incredible hair - but I made a judgment call to stick with Shane at the booth. One, the other girls weren't nearly as good looking; and two, I'm not sure if it was the pills, but something was making Shane act particularly squirmy. His eyes kept darting around and sweat was beading and dripping from his forehead.

Eventually the band took a break and Brian and his partner returned. Almost immediately, the girls all left to go powder their noses.

"The trick," Brian explained, panting from exertion, "is not to tell her that she looks like the girl from Soul Train. She gets that all the time.

"What's wrong with you guys?" he asked, finally noticing our expressions.

"Ask him," I pointed at Shane.

Shane turned around on the bench so he could clearly see the bathroom, making sure the girls weren't sneaking up on him. "They're Vietnamese," he explained.

"So?"

"My dad said that during the war the Cong used to make Vietnamese girls fuck monkeys so they would get diseases and then spread them to the American soldiers."

Brian and I exchanged a look.

"Shane," Brian said, pulling him down. "Shane, that's only a half truth."

"Stop it," I told Brian; then I got in Shane's face. "Shane, man. Relax. These are college students from KU. Not Cong whores, okay? Chill out."

Shane nodded and drank his beer - the entire glass in three great gulps.

"Do you think it's the pills?" Brian asked me. "Because I don't feel anything."

"Yeah, me neither."

"You want to go get some air, Shane?"

"...maybe..."

Brian got up and took Shane's arm. He gave me some money and said, "Settle up and you think you can stick around and make some excuse for me? I don't want her feelings hurt."

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After roaming the streets for a while, I spotted my friends standing in a poorly lit alleyway.

"Brian?" I called out. "Everything okay?"

"Not sure," he answered. "Shane just up-chucked but he says he's fine now."

"I am fine."

"Maybe we should call it a night?" Brian said as I joined them. "If it was the pills, I sure don't want to spew at the wrong time."

"I'm okay," Shane insisted. "I think it was just I ate some bad food for lunch or something. I feel fine now, really."

"So, what do you want to do?" Brian asked me. "Risk it?"

"Here's what," I answered. "Let's get something to eat and see how we're doing after that. Because, honest to God, I don't feel high at all."

"Yeah, me either," Brian agreed. "So that sounds like a plan. Shane? What do you think?"

"I'm good. I told you, I'm fine now. I actually feel a lot better."

We headed for the main street. "What did you tell the girls?" Brian asked.

"The truth. That the stupid one had to go vomit and the ugly one had to help hold his hair back. They were very understanding."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it." I spotted a neon sign for Taco Loco and pointed.

"Hell, yes," Brian said and we had our destination.

"By the way," I said. "The girl you were dancing with? Her name is Tina. I got her phone number."

"Is that right?"

"Yes."

"She looks like that sexy Asian chick from Soul Train, don't you think?"

Brian laughed. "Asshole," he called me.

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"Aliens," Brian told Shane. "Tagging people."

Shane put his taco down and said, "What?"

"The reason she doesn't remember getting that tattoo is because it isn't a tattoo," Brian explained. "It is an alien tagging system. They abducted her, probed her, tagged her, wiped her memory, and sent her back to earth. Happens all the time. Like we do with cattle."

Shane ignored him and kept eating.

"Just hope you don't ever wake up to find one of those numbers on your hip, buddy," Brian continued. "Or you won't be able to wear white at your own wedding."

Shane paused, shook his head, then started chomping again.

"So, what about you, Virg?" Brian switched his attention towards me.

"I guess as long as they wiped my memory, I'd be fine with the probing."

"Of course you would. No, what about your job? I thought you were going to start your own business again?"

I shrugged and unwrapped another taco. "Still thinking about it."

"Well, hurry up, man. I need you to hire me so I can get out of the mall."

Shane swallowed quick and added, "No, you need to get promoted to Metcalf South. That's the best mall."

"Are you kidding? The moneys at Oak Park. Burn-outs, heads, jailbait and freaks hang at Metcalf."

"Yeah, right." Shane sucked his straw. "You belong there."

Brian showed him a middle finger. "I'm not kidding, Virgil," he said. "I've been taking these classes at KCCC and the only way out of a 9 to 5 grind is to start your own business. Like that house painting business you had after high school. You should have never given that up."

"I wasn't making any money," I said. "Plus the amount of stuff I've learned working for Eric...."

"Right. You could open your own construction company by now."

"Not quite. Anyway, Eric said his uncle may make him a partner in the company, and then he'd promote me up to the office where I could get paid to learn all that bullshit you're paying people to learn."

"Ah," Brian waved that away. "You don't want to be stuck at a desk doing paperwork all day. That's what you're going to hire me for."

"And answer the phone?"

"Yes."

"Filing?"

"Right."

"Make coffee?"

"Whatever."

"Sorry, but I had someone with a vagina in mind for that position."

"Well, I don't have one on me now, but I can get one easy enough."

"You're so hot about starting a business, why don't you do something?" I asked.

"Because I'm not good at anything!" he cried.

"Then why would I hire you?"

Brian nodded. "Touche," he said, taking the last taco.

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Shortly after quitting Taco Loco, the night started coming together. We happened upon some acquaintance at another bar and drinks - lots of drinks - were imbibed. Then the pills must have kicked in because time seemed to stretch, blank out and pop.

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I'm in a group and we're all laughing, laughing so hard we can't breathe. No idea why. Eventually one of the girls laughs until she can't breathe and falls on her ass and then you couldn't stop the hilarity with a sack full of dead puppies.

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I've got a girl - don't know her name - pinned to the wall in a narrow hallway. Our mouths are clamped together, tongues fighting like boxers trying to own the corners. Her hand is at the crotch of my pants, clenching my rod through the fabric the way I've seen eagles grab salmon from the water. She wants me to follow her into the ladies' restroom, but Brian is calling for me, telling me we must go.

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We're driving - holy shit, I'm *driving! - somewhere. Lights are a blur. I feel like we're moving but can't tell in which direction. Brian is next to me, hitting my arm and yelling in my ear.*

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Now Shane is driving. He's following a car. Why?

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We're at a house in the country. Booze just everywhere. I've got cups in both hands. A naked girl runs through the living room out to the yard, and everybody follows.

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My hands are suddenly empty. Brian is next to me, looking up. I can't help myself; I look up too. It is a full moon.

"Hear that?" Brian asks.

"What?"

"The full moon.... Just called my name."

"Don't do it, Brian," I try to say, but I'm laughing too hard to finish.

Brian falls to his knees, he lifts his head, and builds up to a magnificent lupine howl; "eeerrr, eeRRRR, RRRRR. ARRRROOOOO!"

And everybody starts howling and barking at the moon.

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A girl is having a breakdown. A def con four nuclear breakdown. She is yelling and crying and beating on her chest. People try to approach, but she lashes out. She picks up the phone.

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We're in the car again, Shane driving. Brian is in the backseat singing:

"Boom! Boom! Aka-lacka-lacka-boom!"

"Boom! Boom! Aka-lacka-lacka Boom! Boom!"

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Stars now. Silence except for the gentle lapping of water against a lake shore. It is almost dawn.

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Light painted the sky and water pastel pink as the sun rose over the lake. Shane was slowly wading through the shallow end, shoes off, pants rolled up past his knees. The morning was fine; warm, only a few fingers of clouds stretching from the horizon. The start of another glorious summer day in the sunflower state.

Brian and I sat on the trunk of my Oldsmobile, drinking beer to hedge against our imminent hangovers.

"You know what it is?" Brian asked.

"What what is?"

"That tattoo? What it is, is she went out partying and wound up with a funny guy who thought it would be hilarious to ink something totally random on her hip. Like his Galaga high score or something. And she was so messed up she probably thought it was a good idea at the time. Now she's branded for life by one bad decision."

"Probably right," I said. "People can be stupid."

We watched Shane lean over and run his fingers across the top of the lake, playing with water-spiders no doubt.

"I don't know," Brian said. "In a way it's kind of beautiful."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about, so I drank my beer in silence.

After a while, Brian said, "Thanks, Virg."

"For what?"

"For this. For last night. For always being there whenever I really need to just go out and get fucked up."

END

In 1986 I joined everybody in the entire world in unbridled enthusiasm for "Keep Your Hands to Yourself." Subsequently, I aligned myself with a more select group of aficionados in the realization that "Keep Your Hands to Yourself", for all its merits, was not the Georgia Satellites' best song. Not even close. Don't bother looking for it in their top ten.

In 1989 the Satellites closed the book on AOR (Album Oriented Rock) with the release of In the Land of Salvation and Sin*. Like the mastodon, that art form is long dead, but at its heart, AOR was about creating an album where every song was at least good, if not excellent, and the arrangement, the sequence, of all those great songs meant something. And I am eternally grateful that* Salvation *was around during my first disastrous romance because it remains the best break-up album ever recorded. You must listen to it from start to finish, track by track, for it to work, but once the Satellites shut it down with* Dan Takes Five *- man, no matter how bad it is, you know that one way or the other, you'll get through.*